

THE BAHAMAS 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of religion is a fundamental right. Individuals may practice freely the religion of their choice or practice no religion at all. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution refers to “an abiding respect for Christian values” in its preamble; however, there is no state-established religious body or official religion.

The government regularly engaged the Bahamas Christian Council (BCC), composed of religious leaders from Christian denominations, on societal, political, and economic issues. Smaller groups, like the Jewish, Rastafarian, and Baha’i communities also held consultations with the government. The Rastafarian community continued to raise concerns over profiling, marijuana use, and access to education. Some members of the Rastafarian community said the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by detaining community members for marijuana use and prohibiting marijuana-based ceremonial rituals. In June, Prime Minister Philip Davis’s government announced plans to introduce legislation to regulate the medical cannabis and industrial hemp industries in 2023.

Rastafarian leaders said some private schools banned dreadlocks and Rastafarian turbans.

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with government officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss religious freedom issues, with a focus on religious diversity. Throughout the year, embassy officials met with the members of the BCC to discuss their positions on social and political issues. Embassy officials also engaged with members of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 355,600 (midyear 2022). According to the most recent census in 2010, more than 90 percent of the population practices a religion. Of those, Protestants make up 70 percent of the

population: Baptists, 35 percent; Anglicans, 14 percent; Pentecostals, 9 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 4 percent; Methodists, 4 percent; Church of God, 2 percent; and Brethren, 2 percent. Approximately 12 percent of the population is Roman Catholic.

Other Christians comprise 13 percent of the population, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Greek Orthodox Christians, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other religious groups include Jews, Baha'is, Rastafarians, Muslims, Black Hebrew Israelites, and Hindus. According to a leader of the Rastafarian community, there are more than 20,000 Rastafarians in the country. The leader of the Jewish community estimates there are 1,000 Jews. A small number of persons practice Obeah. According to the census, 5 percent of the population is listed as having other, no religion, or unspecified beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to practice one's religion. It forbids infringement on an individual's freedom to choose or change his or her religion, and prohibits discrimination based on belief. Parliament may limit religious practices in the interest of defense, public safety, health, public order, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. The constitution refers to "an abiding respect for Christian values" in its preamble; however, there is no state-established religious body or official religion.

The practice of Obeah, an Afro-Caribbean belief system with some similarities to Voodoo, is illegal. Those caught practicing it or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person's health through the practice of Obeah may face a sentence of three months in prison. Stealing from a place of worship is punishable by up to 10 years in prison. The publication and sale of any book, writing, or representation deemed blasphemous is punishable by up to two years in prison, but opinions on religious issues "expressed in good faith and in decent language" are not subject to prosecution under the law. The government typically does not enforce the blasphemy law.

The law requires religious groups to register if they use any form of income to promote their religion. Religious groups must legally incorporate to purchase land. There are no legal provisions to encourage or discourage the formation of religious communities, which have the same taxation requirements as profit-making companies if they incorporate. To incorporate, religious groups follow the regulations applicable to nonprofit entities, requiring the “undertaking” of the religious organization to be “without pecuniary gain,” and that the group maintains a building for gathering. In accordance with legislation, religious organizations seeking value-added tax exemptions must register with the Ministry of Financial Services, Trade, and Industry and with the Department of Immigration and apply for exemptions on a case-by-case basis.

The law prohibits marijuana use, including for religious rituals.

Religion is a recognized academic subject at public schools and is included in mandatory standardized achievement and certificate tests. Religion classes in government-supported schools focus on the study of Christian philosophy, Biblical texts, and, to a lesser extent, comparative and non-Christian religions. Religious groups may establish private schools. The constitution states no one shall be compelled to participate in religious instruction or observances of a religion other than his or her own. It allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in private schools. The government permits home schooling and regulates it under the Ministry of Education.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government regularly engaged the BCC on societal, political, and economic issues. Smaller groups like the Jewish, Rastafarian, and Baha’i communities also held consultations with the government to discuss issues of mutual interest.

Some Rastafarians continued to state the government violated their constitutional right to religious freedom by prohibiting the legal use of marijuana in ceremonial rituals. Rastafarians said police continued to profile and arrest them for possessing small quantities of marijuana used in ceremonial rituals. If

convicted of a crime, Rastafarians were not exempt from the prison's short-hair policy and were required to cut their dreadlocks. Rastafarians convicted of drug offenses were also placed in drug rehabilitation centers. During the year, the government entered consultations with Rastafarian religious leaders on medicinal cannabis and industrial hemp legislation. Rastafarian leader Rithmond McKinney said the discussions were a step in the right direction in sanctioning marijuana use for the Rastafarian community. The government said it expects to introduce the bill in 2023.

Rastafarian leaders said public schools required Rastafarian students to wear turbans to cover their dreadlocks.

The government continued to include Christian prayer in significant official events. Government officials and members of parliament routinely quoted religious teachings during speeches, and senior government officials in their official capacities occasionally addressed assemblies during formal religious services.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The leader of the Jewish community highlighted public support for the opening of two kosher restaurants during the year.

Rastafarian leaders said some private schools banned dreadlocks and Rastafarian turbans.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met regularly with government officials from the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Discussions included promoting inclusive communities with a respect for human rights and religious diversity in the country.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with the members of the BCC to discuss their positions on social and political issues. Embassy officials also engaged with members of the Muslim, Rastafarian, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance.